

First Year Studies: American Ideologies and American Dreams

Sarah Lawrence College 2019-2020
Poli1036F(1), Academic Year
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30 – 10:55

Professor Samuel J Abrams
Titsworth #1, sabrams@slc.edu

In 1931, historian James T. Adams wrote about the idea of the *American Dream* in his volume, *Epic of America*, and argued that the American dream is one where individuals and communities, “...dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

What does it mean to be an American today? How about in the past? What are the beliefs and ideas that many Americans hold about the United States and themselves? How have these ideas changed over time? How do these manifest themselves in historical and contemporary politics and discourse? What is the Dream? Has it been realized in the past? How about today? Who is realizing the Dream and who is not?

We will explore these questions together and do so with the tools and concepts that come from political science. We will examine different groups throughout history – from waves of Jewish immigrants to the LGBTQ+ movement – to better understand and tease out common themes and ideas as well as understand how ideologies and dreams have changed and diverged over time.

Further, we will look at basic American politics, the problems of collective decision making, the purposes of government, the formal institutions of national government, Congress, the Supreme Court, the Presidency, and the bureaucracy. Congressional and Presidential elections, the role of the media, and the mobilization of citizens through political parties and interest groups will be considered as well. Our examination of these institutions and ideas will be interdisciplinary in nature and will present a number of the major general theories underlying the study of American government. This will give us the knowledge of the structure and operation of the institutions of the American political system and how their roles intersect, compete, and

complement each other. Additionally, we will become familiar with the actors and the institutions within our federal government and those institutions affecting our federal government.

From this investigation, students will gain an awareness of the role of citizens, interest groups, political parties, and politicians within the American political system. Moreover, they will better understand the role of politics and strategy in the operation and impact of the government. Taken collectively, we will develop the ability to synthesize the material from the course to develop our own opinions regarding the proper role of government in our society. We will be talking about politically charged and often divisive issues, including abortion, immigration, race relations, and homosexuality.

This FYS seminar will be an open, nonpartisan forum for discussion and debate. As such, the course will be driven by data, not dogma. We will use a variety of approaches based in logic and evidence to find answers to various puzzles about American policy and will treat this material as social scientist, not ideologues.

Comfort with numbers and statistics is expected. This course will have weekly conferences for the first six weeks; bi-weekly conferences thereafter.

Course Responsibilities and Requirements:

Evaluative Structure

- Active and Engaged Participation: 10% (Includes in class writing)
- Presentation and Discussion Leader (Multiple Presentations): 20%
- Weekly Memos: 35% (10 in total)
- Conference Work: 35%

1. Active and Engaged Participation

This is self-explanatory. Each week, please come to class having read the reading and contemplated your classmate's discussion questions. A seminar cannot work unless people have carefully read the assigned material and are prepared to share their thoughts with others.

2. Presentation and Discussion Leader

All students will be asked to lead a class discussion and make a number of presentations during the term. Discussion assignments will be made at the start of the term.

Leading a week's discussion entails providing the class with a short overview (30 minutes) of the main issues (strengths, weaknesses, and controversies) and leading a discussion of the readings. You will be responsible for circulating 6-8 questions to structure the discussion during your week. Please email these to me and I will circulate them to the class. Think carefully about your questions: you want to point out areas that will generate some debate and discourse rather than simple "yes/no" types of answers. I expect you to organize your presentation so that everyone in the class comes away with the key questions posed by the authors, how they answered those questions, what we've learned and what we still need to know.

All students should arrive at class with questions, topics, and issues to be vetted and debated. Class participation involves both your performance as a session leader and your active, thoughtful participation throughout the term. Your job is to come to class prepared to answer: What are the central research questions or problems raised by the authors? What is the narrative being presented? What is the bias and why? What core concepts, evidence, and research methods are utilized? As you do the readings, think about what the author did right as well as wrong. What are the interesting ideas in the paper? If you disagree with an argument, what would it require to persuade you? Can these differences be adjudicated through further empirical or historical study? Who are the players, agents, institutions and how are they changing based on the source material?

A good seminar should have active dialog and debate. If someone proposes an idea that is contrary to your view, speak up. I will often be intentionally provocative, so be prepared to push back. Your task is to engage one another in an assessment of the readings.

3. Short Memos:

All students are asked to prepare a series of memos relating to the readings each week. A total of 10 are required and these memos, should be no more than 900 words, and are due in class, and need to be handed to me in hard copy.

Formats may vary but it is useful to include:

- ideas, concepts, arguments that you found stimulating, worth remembering and building on,
- questions, concerns, disagreements with ideas encountered,
- connections, linkages, contradictions between one idea or approach and another.

Note that this does not mean summarize. It would be useful to also keep in mind, given what you've read, what's the next question to be asked? How would you ask it? Are they key dependent/independent variables that the authors neglected to address? Are there theoretical mechanisms that have not been explored? What are the narratives saying about agents and institutions? How do the accounts vary in the different sources? Can you pull together the conflicting historical accounts and explain why the sources and interpretations of particular events differ greatly?

4. Conference Work

The final project for this class will be your conference project. As this is a course about the American Dream, you will select a community or group that is of interest to you – a neighborhood/town, city, region, race/ethnicity, cultural group, religious group, and so on –and you will trace the group's socio-political history and its unique view of the American Dream and its progress toward realization. Via this analytical narrative that can include social science sources and writings such as memoirs, you will provide insight contemporary politics as we approach the 2020 elections.

Of course, this project cannot possibly offer a comprehensive treatment of any one group. However, you can select a few key features and aspects of the group – such as labor, housing, mobility, political consciousness and identity – tie those features into a story about the group's view of the American Dream. Ultimately, you will need to bring in a theoretical approach from the course to bear on why a particular community looks and behaves the way it does today. You will need to specify a theoretical approach that connects the variables of social change that you select and discuss the kinds of evidence you could collect to answer your question. We will discuss it extensively during class and in our conference meetings.

We will discuss details in greater detail in person, but some key dates for the academic year and conference work include:

-Preliminary Reading List: October 31, 2019.

After discussions in conference meetings, you will create a long list related to your project and spend time reviewing possible materials for inclusion and deep reading. By October 31st, you will need a refined list of readings that you will use for your conference work.

-Outline of Reading List/Primary Thesis: December 10, 2019.

Based on your readings, you will briefly outline key ideas, questions, and arguments from the reading and present your preliminary thesis for the project.

-Thesis Statement/Paper Outline: January 27, 2020.

This is fairly self-explanatory. You should have a thesis and introduction ready along with a paper outline.

-Full Draft Due: March 30, 2020.

-Revised, Final Draft Due: April 23, 2020.

Background Information

Communication All students are required to have an email account that they check regularly. I frequently communicate with students via email, and not checking your email will not be an excuse for missing an assignment or reading.

Privacy in Class

All discussions for the class will be considered private and off the record. Recording in any form is not acceptable or permitted. Moreover, the course will adopt the Chatham House Rule. The rule originated at Chatham House with the aim of encouraging openness of discussion and facilitating the sharing of information. It is now used throughout the world as an aid to free discussion of sensitive issues. It provides a way for speakers to openly discuss their views in private while allowing the topic and nature of the debate to be made public and contribute to a broader conversation.

The Chatham House Rule reads as follows: “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

Statement of Academic Integrity

Students are bound to uphold Sarah Lawrence College’s Undergraduate Policy on Academic Integrity found in the Student Handbook:
http://www.slc.edu/studentlife/media/pdf/SLC_Student_Handbook_012314.pdf

Reasonable Accommodations

If you have a disability that may interfere with your ability to participate in the activities, coursework, or assessment of the objectives of this course, you may be entitled to reasonable accommodations. Please contact Polly Waldman, Associate Dean of Studies and Disabilities Services located in Westlands 116. You may also call Disability Services at 914.395.2235 or email pwaldman@sarahlawrence.edu. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students,

with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities of Sarah Lawrence College and the College will make reasonable accommodations when appropriate and necessary.

If you have any concerns or need assistance, you must touch base with me or the Dean of Students office at the start of the term. Accommodations cannot be made last minute and will not be granted without proper documentation with the Deans Office.

Mutual Respect

This class will adhere to the college wide set of “Principles for Mutual Respect.” They can be found online here:

https://my.slc.edu/ICS/Employee_Info/Policies_and_Procedures/Principles_for_Mutual_Respect.jnz

To summarize, we will operate under the following precepts:

- As a community, we respect those with whom we live, learn and work at Sarah Lawrence College: students, staff, and faculty.
- We aspire to work with integrity and honor.
- We foster honest inquiry, free speech and open discourse. We seek wisdom with understanding.
- We embrace our diversity in all its dimensions.
- We respect one another’s privacy and honor personal boundaries.
- We are responsible and respectful in all of our communications.
- We work to keep our campus and its natural environment a beautiful and welcoming place, and to leave it in a better state than we found it.
- We endeavor to inflict no harm on one another, in word or deed.
- As a community, we strive to support one another in upholding these principles.

Approach Toward Politics and Current Events

I am a strong believer in the 1967 Kalven Committee statement from the University of Chicago. They issued a “Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action” and I believe that the course should exemplify the goals of the report. The full report can be found online here:

<https://provost.uchicago.edu/reports/report-universitys-role-political-and-social-action>

While there are some points up for debate in the Kalven Committee statement, I would like highlight the following sentiments:

The mission of the university is the discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge. Its domain of inquiry and scrutiny includes all

aspects and all values of society. A university faithful to its mission will provide enduring challenges to social values, policies, practices, and institutions. By design and by effect, it is the institution which creates discontent with the existing social arrangements and proposes new ones. In brief, a good university, like Socrates, will be upsetting.

The instrument of dissent and criticism is the individual faculty member or the individual student. The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic. It is, to go back once again to the classic phrase, a community of scholars. To perform its mission in the society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures. A university, if it is to be true to its faith in intellectual inquiry, must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community.

Preparation for the Course

You are expected to have basic familiarity with basic research methods and the various logics of social scientific inference. Moreover, it is expected that you have taken courses in the social sciences and will draw on theory ranging from sociology to psychology to inform your thinking as we move through this course. We will review a number of these concepts and some key references worth examining include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Evera, Stephen van. 1997. *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Johnson, Janet Buttolph, and H.T. Reynolds. 2005. *Political Science Research Methods*. 5th ed. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Collier, David and Henry E. Brady, eds. 2004. *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc
- Goertz, Gary and James Mahoney 2012. *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fall Semester Readings

- Arthur Brooks 2019. *Love Your Enemies*
- Samuel J Abrams 2019. *On the American Dream*.
 Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/05/opinion/american-dream.html>
 Online: <https://www.aei.org/publication/family-and-individualism-a-new-view-of-the-american-dream/>
- Doctorow, E.L. 1975 *Ragtime*. New York: Random House.
- Cullen, Jim 2004. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0195173252
- Joseph J Ellis 2019. *American Dialogue: The Founders and Us*
- Jill Lepore 2013. *The Story of America: Essays on Origins*
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2002. *Democracy in America*. Mansfield and Winthrop (Trans.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 0226805360
- James Fallows and Deborah Fallows. 2018 *Our Towns*
- Dahl, Robert A. 2003 *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* Second Edition New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN: 0300095244
- Fischer, Claude S 2011 *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 0226251446
- Putnam, Robert D. 2001. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* New York: Touchtone Books. ISBN: 0743203046
- Skocpol, Theda. 2003 *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. ISBN: 0806136278
- Brands, H.W. 2011. *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* New York: Penguin. 0143119559
- Putnam, Robert D. 2014 *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* New York: Simon and Schuster. ISBN: 1476769893
- Murray, Charles 2013. *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* New York: Crown. 030745343X

Zaloom, Caitlin. 2019. Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost
Princeton: Princeton University Press.